

Jessa Archer



BASKERVILLE FOR THE BEAR

A THISTLEWOOD
STAR MINI-MYSTERY



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A Thistlewood Star Mini-Mystery

JESSA ARCHER

Archer Mysteries

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Black bear, black bear, what did you see?

When a crack of gunshot disturbs her morning birdwatching, journalist Ruth Townsend is certain it's the neighbor she's warned twice about hunting on her land. But she stumbles upon more than she bargained for—a bear trap, complete with a dead bear.

The sheriff advises her not to make waves. But Ruth isn't inclined to let it go. It's her land, and bear trapping is illegal. The final straw, however, is finding an injured cub in her shed.

Ruth is determined to get justice for the murdered bear and its cub. But appearances can be deceiving. Will Ruth find the bear's killer? Or will she be caught in his trap?



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☆ Chapter One ☆

TWO MINUTES BEFORE THE GUNSHOT, I was standing on the wooden deck that stretched across the back of my house, watching a brilliant red bird through the lens of my new binoculars. Cronkite, acting as guard cat, had been perched on the railing in front of me, scanning the trees that lined the backyard with a concentration that was a little unnerving. I

would have offered him the binoculars for a closer look, but his unaided eyesight was obviously better than mine with the binoculars. I'd known the cardinal was there—or at least that *something* was there—several seconds before I located it, because Cronk had tensed up and issued this faint, guttural noise, somewhere on the range between a hiss and a snarl. The cardinal had then flown up to a slightly higher branch above the evergreens between us, where it had held perfectly still for a moment, as if testing the winds. Then it had spread its wings and taken off, a splotch of crimson against the heavy, gray November sky.

Breathtaking. Calming.

“Isn't that beautiful?” I'd said to Cronkite, nodding upward toward the spot where the bird was rapidly

becoming a tiny red blip among the clouds.

My cat had responded with an annoyed look. The majesty and wonder of nature were clearly lost on him. All he knew was that his prospective snack had flown the coop.

“You, sir, have a one-track mind. Everything isn’t about your belly, you know. A belly that is *full*, I might add.”

The chance—and it was never more than a chance—of seeing something as magnificent as that cardinal’s early morning flight was the reason I had hauled myself out to the deck almost every morning since my return to Thistlewood a few months back. At first, the birdwatching routine had been a way of centering myself. It served as my daily reminder that there was a vast, wonderful world out there beyond the chaos of my personal life, and as a promise that I

would again find the sense of inner peace that an unplanned early retirement and even more unplanned divorce had taken from me.

Bird-therapy had worked, for the most part. Increasingly, over the past few weeks, my morning ritual had begun to feel more like a technique for holding *onto* the calm that I was starting to find here in this tiny mountain town. When eighteen-year-old Ruth Townsend had left this place for college nearly thirty-two years ago, she'd sworn that she would never, ever in a million years return to Thistlewood, Tennessee. Karma had apparently taken that rash statement as a challenge, and after several decades as a reporter in Nashville, I was right back where I'd started.

The shot rang out just as I brought the binoculars back up

to my eyes, startling me so badly that I nearly dropped them over the side of the deck. Cronkite took off into the house, fishtailing and hissing his way through the cat door. A small flock of birds took off, as well, which meant there was little point in continuing my morning birdwatching session.

I could literally *feel* my blood pressure rising as I gripped the rail of the deck.

Ben Faircloth.

Again.

This made three times I'd caught him hunting on my land. Three times in two months. Faircloth had plenty of land of his own, but he'd cleared most of it for farming over the years. That meant he no longer had woods to hunt on, and he seemed to believe it gave him license to use mine.

He'd probably been doing so regularly during the years since my parents died, although it would have been nice if he'd asked. When I lived in Nashville, the house had been mostly unoccupied, aside from a few weeks each summer when we came here on vacation. I might even have granted him permission to hunt back then, despite the fact that hunting kind of icks me out. But now, it was simply too dangerous.

The first time I'd caught Ben stomping around in my woods with his gun, I'd been pleasant enough, even though he'd scared the stuffing out of Cronk and startled away a purple martin, which were fairly rare here in the Smoky Mountains. Keeping my tone as friendly as possible, I'd nevertheless made it quite clear to Ben that he couldn't keep wandering across the property line in search of game. He

was obviously the silent type. All I'd gotten was a nod and then he wandered back to his farm.

The second time I'd caught him, the man had simply slinked off, not even bothering to acknowledge me. Later that day, I'd stopped in at the local hardware store and purchased a whole stack of signs reading *NO HUNTING* and *PRIVATE PROPERTY*. One of these signs was now nailed to every third or fourth tree from the highway to the end of the boundary I shared with Faircloth.

And yet here he was, back again. Surely, the man could read? As much as I hated to stir up trouble with my neighbors so soon after moving back to Thistlewood, this would be his last warning. If Ben Faircloth fired a gun on my land again, I'd have no choice but to file a formal complaint.

I went into the house in search of something brightly-colored that would keep the old guy from mistaking me for wildlife. Cronkite was nowhere to be seen. The fact that he was frightened made me even madder. This was *his* home, too. Maine coon cats don't like being cooped up all the time. They need to get outside and roam occasionally. Cronk never went beyond the brush surrounding the cabin, but the possibility of a stray bullet hitting him was one of the key reasons I'd told Ben Faircloth in no uncertain terms that he could *not* hunt here.

I hurried upstairs and rummaged through my wardrobe until my fingers closed around a bright orange sweater with a small black pumpkin in the middle. Another shot rang out as I pulled the sweater over my head. I didn't even bother to

check the mirror. Halloween was well over a month ago, but who cared what I looked like? I was on my way to have a few angry words with my neighbor, not to have tea with the Queen of England.

“I’ll be back,” I yelled to Cronkite, who was probably hiding under the bed where my daughter, Cassie, sleeps when she visits. While he definitely likes having a bigger yard to roam in, Cronkite saw far less of Cassie now than he had when we lived in Nashville. He’d made it clear that he was not entirely happy with that tradeoff.

I locked the cat door as an extra precaution and took off down the hill. The ground was muddy and slippery beneath my feet, so I slowed my pace a bit. If I fell and tumbled all the way down to the woods, I was going to be doubly mad

by the time I caught up with Faircloth.

The trees around the cabin grew tall and close, some tangled in knots to the point where it was a challenge to tell where one ended and the other began. A few feet into the thicket, it was already hard to catch a glimpse of the house. In the summertime, it would be impossible. It was easy to get lost if you didn't know where you were going, as I knew from experience. I'd spent a lot of time hiking through these woods as a teenager, not just because I enjoyed nature, which I did, but because the long-overgrown path through the woods had cut fifteen minutes off the walk to my best friend Wren's house back in the day.

I didn't have to venture in too far, however, since I was pretty sure Faircloth would be close to our property line. In

fact, he'd probably be within sight of one of the *NO HUNTING* signs I'd posted.

Stepping over a small stream, I hiked up to the clearing where I'd found Ben Faircloth that first time, perched up in the ancient tree stand that was built before my parents bought the place in the 1980s. It had been rickety back then, and I never understood why my dad hadn't torn it down. In addition to being worried about stray bullets and gunfire scaring my cat, I also didn't want to crest the hill one fine day to find Faircloth at the bottom of the tree with a broken neck and the stand splintered into jagged pieces all around him.

To my relief, the tree stand was empty this time, as was the clearing. I eyed the stand warily, making a mental note

to check the message board at Pat's Diner to see if I could find a handyman willing to come out and rip the thing down before the weather got any colder. Maybe I could use the remains for firewood?

I looked around for a bit, and then yelled out, "Mr. Faircloth? Is that you?"

If Faircloth was within earshot, he didn't answer. That didn't surprise me, actually. If you'd had your hand in the cookie jar after being warned twice, even though there were multiple signs clearly posted with the words *HANDS OFF THE COOKIES*, you generally didn't answer when someone called out your name.

Faircloth wasn't going to get away that easily, though. I knew where he lived. In fact, I could see his farmhouse, off

in the distance, from the very spot where I stood.

A cold sensation hit my toes, reminding me that I should have put on boots before I left the house. You could barely even see my sneakers beneath the coating of thick Tennessee mountain mud. The stuff is so plentiful that someone should package it up as a souvenir and sell it to the tourists who flock into Thistlewood each summer for a week of splashing in the Freedom River, riding the rapids, or just communing with nature.

Something caught my eye as I turned back toward the house in search of a pair of warm, dry socks. Next to the tree, directly below the old hunting stand, something black was stretched out on the ground. I moved a few steps closer so that the tree wasn't blocking my view. As soon as I realized

what I was looking at, the air left my lungs in a long whoosh.

It was the body of a black bear, its hind leg firmly caught in the rusty steel jaws of a trap. While the bodies I'd encountered during my years as newspaper reporter had been human, for the most part, I could tell at a glance that the bear had been dead for at least a day.

The most troubling thing, however, was the bear's head. It was simply *gone*.

☆ Chapter Two ☆

I TOOK off toward the road, eager to get away from the sight and not really paying much attention to where I was going. My foot snagged the edge of a thick root jutting up from the ground. I pitched forward, grabbing onto a tree at the last second and narrowly saving myself from planting face-first in the mud.

Faircloth had crossed way, way over the line this time. Shooting at squirrels and birds on my property without permission and against my clearly expressed wishes was bad enough. Setting a bear trap on my land, however, was downright dangerous. Cronkite never wandered this far back, but I did. And Cassie had been visiting the previous week. She'd taken long walks through these woods and it had never once crossed my mind to tell her to beware of a *bear trap*. What if she'd gotten caught? Odds are she wouldn't even have been able to phone for help given the abysmal cell coverage up here in the mountains.

My planned third and final warning for Faircloth was now out of the question. Bear hunting was legal, and it might even be in season for all I knew. I didn't really follow

such things. But bear hunting on clearly marked *private* property was most certainly *not* legal. And bear *trapping* was illegal everywhere in the state.

That warranted a call to the sheriff's office, something I'd really, really hoped to avoid. Thistlewood was too small for its own police force. If you needed law enforcement, your only choice was the county sheriff, and I'd gone to school with the current occupant of that office, Steve Blevins. He was a jerk back then, and while our paths had not yet crossed since I returned to Thistlewood, I'd heard stories from my oldest friend, Wren Lawson, and my newest friend, Ed Shelton. Nothing I'd heard suggested that Blevins had improved with age. If anything, he'd gotten worse.

Ed Shelton, who had been the sheriff until an accident

forced him to retire early, claimed that the one full time deputy, Billy Thorpe, was a decent guy. Maybe I'd get lucky and they'd send him instead.

I walked the last few yards toward the road, hopping across the drainage ditch and onto the rocky shoulder. My shoes made a sickening squelch, splashing mud onto the hem of my jeans. It was a longer walk if I followed the road, but if I hiked back through the woods there would be absolutely no chance of salvaging these shoes. And it would probably take much longer than usual, anyway, since I'd be watching every step on the leaf-covered path, worried about uncovering another of Ben's bear traps.

As I checked to see if my phone had a signal, I heard a rumbling noise approaching from behind me. A battered

truck was heading my way. The driver slowed, flipped on his hazard lights, and pulled to a stop next to me. It was Gary Webb, whose property shared a border with both my land and Faircloth's.

"Ruth," he said cheerfully. "What brings you out to the side of the road this morning? Everything okay?"

Gary and I had chatted on several occasions at the grocery store and at Pat's Diner, where I eat far more often than I should. He'd asked me out after the last of those conversations, a little over a month ago. I had declined, partly because it had been too soon after my divorce. After more than a quarter-century of marriage, I thought it made sense to take a few months off before diving back into the dating game. When Gary asked, I hadn't been anywhere

near ready to attempt dinner conversation with a stranger, especially dinner conversation with possibly romantic overtones. He did seem like a nice guy, though, and I'd filed the invitation away as something to consider if he ever broached the subject again.

I stepped closer to the truck and was hit by a strong whiff of cat urine. It's an unmistakable smell, and I've always been glad that whatever Cronkite's faults may be, at least he doesn't spray my furniture or clothes. Gary's truck smelled like it housed an entire horde of felines, which I thought was a little strange. He didn't really strike me as a *cat guy*. But I guess you can never tell.

"I'm heading out to the dump," Webb continued, nodding toward the truck bed, which was filled with

assorted debris—empty cans of paint thinner, a couple of old car batteries, and a half-dozen or so trash bags that, judging from the odor, must have been filled to the brim with used kitty litter. “You need some help?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I just hiked up here to see if I could get a signal to call the sheriff. There’s a dead bear in my woods. Someone set up a trap.”

“A bear, huh?” He whistled through his teeth. “That’s not good. Happens a lot around here, though. And bear hunting is legal. Not sure if it’s in season, but it *i*s deer season and they usually overlap.”

“Bear hunting isn’t legal on private property that’s clearly marked *No Hunting*. And trapping the bears isn’t legal anywhere.”

He gave me a what-are-you-gonna-do sort of shrug. In one sense, he was right. Hunters generally received a lot of latitude out here in the boonies, especially since they were one of the only groups of tourists who rented out cabins during the off-season. Thistlewood depended heavily on tourist income, and any extra money during the winter was a godsend.

But private property was private property. Most people, whether tourists or the most diehard of the local hunters, respected that.

“Want me to clean it up for you?” Webb asked. “I could haul the carcass to the dump with this other junk. Shouldn’t just leave it lying out there in the woods. It might attract scavengers.”

“Thanks, but I want the sheriff’s office to see it.” I looked across the road towards the old Faircloth farm. “Especially since I have a pretty good idea who’s responsible.”

Gary followed my gaze. “Ben Faircloth?”

“Yeah. I’ve caught him hunting on my property a few times before. That’s what brought me out here now. Someone was firing a gun. Scared the daylights out of my cat.”

“Well,” he said, “Ben does love to hunt.”

“And that’s fine. But he needs to take it elsewhere. And the trap...” I shook my head. “That’s something I have to report.”

“Okay. You sure you don’t need help? I could give you a lift back to your house.”

The smell of cat urine was still coming strong from the truck, so I put on my best smile and said. “No, thanks. It’s a nice day and I could use the exercise.”

It really wasn’t a nice day. It was overcast and a bit chilly. But Gary smiled amiably.

“You’re more than welcome,” he said. “And...that dinner offer is still on the table. Any time. Just give me a call.”

You had to give the guy points for tenacity. I couldn’t believe he’d asked me out again, here on the side of the road with my shoes covered in mud, dressed in a ratty old Halloween sweatshirt.

I gave him a vague, “Maybe I’ll do that sometime.”

His smile widened, and he seemed more encouraged than I’d really wanted him to be. “Sure thing. But, Ruth? You

should really call Animal Control instead of the sheriff. They're the ones who usually deal with this kind of thing. And you don't want to get old Ben in trouble over something like this, do you?"

I thought about it for a moment. On the one hand, I'd only been back in town for a few months. Was this the kind of start I wanted to make, especially when I'd soon be launching—or rather, relaunching—the local paper? Did I want to get a reputation as a grumpy old woman telling everyone to stay off her property?

But then I thought again of Cassie hiking through the woods last week, when that trap was most likely already set. Kids sometimes cut through these woods, too, or at least they used to. Plus, I'd already warned Faircloth. I didn't

know if I'd actually press charges, but I needed to report it. Otherwise, he'd probably keep blowing me off.

"No," I said firmly. "If it wasn't for the trap, I'd be willing to let it slide. But it's dangerous. I need to call it in."

Gary shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "Okay. I wouldn't expect too much, though. You're not in the big city anymore. A lot of people hunt around here." He put the truck into drive. "Seriously, though, give me a call about dinner. There's a nice place up the mountain that's still open on weekends."

Then he drove away, taking the heavy ammonia scent with him.

☆ Chapter Three ☆

OF COURSE, I couldn't get cell service until I reached my front porch and let myself into the living room. That's the way Thistlewood is. Even at the best of times, reception is hit or miss. Add in the heavy gray clouds hovering overhead and you have the perfect recipe for zero bars.

Rather than deal with the possibility of a dropped call, I

phoned the sheriff's office from my landline. In Nashville, I'd grown very accustomed to pulling out my cell phone out to call anyone I wanted, search for any information I needed, order a pizza, and so forth. In Woodward County, a landline is still a necessity for most residents. You often have wait until you get home to run that Google search and the closest you'll get to pizza delivery is popping a DiGiorno into the oven.

There was a brief pause after I explained the situation to the dispatcher, then she came back on the line and told me that Sheriff Blevins would be out shortly. In Thistlewood, that could mean anything from ten minutes to a few hours. Given that it wasn't a serious crime, even by local standards, I guessed the latter end of the spectrum was the most likely

scenario. So, I loaded the dishwasher, put on some coffee, and grabbed my Kindle to read for a bit while I waited. To my surprise, however, the coffee had just finished brewing when I heard footsteps on the front porch, followed by a heavy knock at the door.

The last time I'd seen Steve Blevins, he'd been wearing a cap and gown in the colors of Thistlewood High. The feathered blond hair beneath his cap had reached nearly to his shoulders and he'd been sporting his trademark smirk on a face that was handsome, but not nearly as handsome as he thought it was. Blevins was now in the standard Woodward County Sheriff's uniform—a cowboy hat, brown dress shirt, and khaki pants. Whatever remained of the feathered hair was hidden by his hat, which he didn't bother to remove.

The smirk, however, hadn't changed in the slightest.

"Ruth Townsend," he said. "The prodigal daughter returns. How does it feel to come crawling back home?"

"Blevins?" I responded, looking at his badge and then back at his face. "Not...*Steve* Blevins? You mean you never got out of Thistlewood? I thought you were going to play football for UT and then get drafted by the NFL?"

His face fell slightly and then the smirk returned. "It's *Sheriff* Blevins now." He tapped the badge on his chest. "I've actually moved up in the world. The rumor mill at Pat's Diner says you're planning on reopening the *Star*, so I guess you could say you're right back where you started."

"Sure," I told him. "I guess you could say that. Although you'd have to overlook the whole thing where I was a high

school kid working for Mr. Dealey part-time back then and now, I own the place. But otherwise, sure. Right back where I started.”

You’d also have to overlook the part where I spent nearly three decades as a reporter and editor for the state’s largest newspaper, before it sold out to a media conglomerate a few months back and offered me a fairly generous early retirement package. And you’d have to overlook the numerous awards I’d won, including a local Pulitzer back in 2005. But I decided not to go into any of that with Blevins. It wouldn’t impress him, and maybe letting him strut around like he was the king of the county would put him in a good enough mood that he’d be willing to take some action about the bear trap on my property.

I moved out of the doorway and he stepped inside.

“Sorry to hear about your marriage ending,” he said.

“Things are so different these days, aren’t they?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, back then, when something was broken, you fixed it, right? Nowadays, people just walk away.”

I stared at him hard for a moment, knowing there was no good response. If I told him I hadn’t been the one to walk away, I’d be rewarded with a pitying smile, and possibly a follow-up question on what I’d done to drive Joe off. I’d either be the brazen woman unwilling to do what it took to save her marriage or a pathetic creature who couldn’t hold her man.

“The bear is in the woods,” I told him through gritted

teeth. "I'll take you there."

He shrugged. "After you."

I had the distinct impression that Blevins was humoring me more than anything else. There was no way I was going to get any help from him. Gary Webb had been right on that front. I almost turned around to tell Blevins to forget the entire thing. But I didn't. I had set this ship sailing and I would ride it all the way to the shore.

When we reached the tree stand and the bear carcass, Blevins didn't say anything for a moment. He simply stared at the scene with a mixture of boredom and distaste. Finally, he said, "Well, it's dead all right."

"I can see that your powers of observation are just as sharply tuned as they were in high school," I said.

He frowned, possibly trying to figure out whether I was being sincere, and then said, “Honestly, Townsend, I don’t know what you expect me to do about this. Bear hunting isn’t illegal.”

“No, but trapping is. Plus, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re still standing on my property. Private property.”

“Congratulations,” he said.

“Private property that is clearly marked to *prohibit* hunting,” I continued. “And that aside, someone could have gotten hurt.”

“But no one *did* get hurt.” Blevins tilted his head sideways. “Doesn’t even look like the trap was hidden that well. Any human would have seen it.”

“Oh sure, now that it’s attached to the hind leg of a *big*

black bear. Before though, when it was covered with leaves? I don't think so. Either way, this is *my* land. I nailed those signs to the trees myself. And I've warned him twice already."

"Warned who?"

"Ben Faircloth."

Blevins laughed. "Ben? You're kidding."

"I'm most certainly not. I've caught him out here hunting several times. Usually at this exact same spot, too. I heard gunshots this morning and came over fully expecting to find him, but I found *this* instead."

"Not buying it, Townsend. Ben's a good guy. I doubt very much that he had anything to do with this. And do you really want to be *that* person? The one who moves back to

town looking down her nose at local customs and instantly starts stirring up trouble with her neighbors?"

This was going exactly as I'd expected. Blevins was even more arrogant and obtuse than he'd been in high school.

"So," I said. "Let me get this straight. I'm the one stirring up trouble, even though Ben is the one who ignored two direct warnings and set a *bear trap* on his neighbor's land?"

I knew the answer. Of course, I would be considered the troublemaker. Ben Faircloth was *from-here*. While I didn't know his family tree, he'd owned his farm before my family moved to Thistlewood. He was probably born in that farmhouse, or at the very least, his kids had been born there. Not being *from-here* was enough to ensure that many people would consider me the villain in this tale, but I'd also had

the audacity to leave after high school. If I actually pressed charges against the guy, they'd have a jar up in Pat's Diner taking collections for his legal fund by noon the next day. And the jar would fill up quickly, despite the fact that few people around here had two nickels to rub together at the end of the month.

"I'll get Animal Control out here," Blevins said. "They'll take care of it. In the future, though, don't waste the sheriff's time with piddly stuff like this."

I didn't even bother to hold back my laugh. The man had actually referred to himself in the third person. He gave me a look that was equal parts confused and annoyed, then turned and stomped off, leaving me beside the bear trap. I waited several minutes before following, deciding that I vastly

preferred the company of a dead, headless bear to that of Sheriff Steve Blevins.

When I finally made it back to my yard, I headed for the hose outside my utility shed to clean some of the mud off my shoes. As I reached down to turn on the water, a faint rustling from inside the shed caught my attention. Was it Blevins again, snooping around? No. It couldn't be. His car was no longer in the driveway.

The noise came again, followed by a faint whimper. It didn't *sound* like Cronkite, but after seeing that poor bear in the trap my mind immediately jumped to the worst-case scenario.

“Cronkite? Is that you? What's wrong?”

Curiosity and worry were now stronger than fear. I

opened the shed door, letting in the cold November light. It was still too dim to see the back of the shed, so I stepped inside and felt around for the light switch. When the bulb flicked on, the scuffling increased. A sheet of plywood leaning against the back wall came tumbling down, revealing what appeared at first to be a very large rat.

Then the creature turned to peer up at me with large brown eyes. It was a bear cub, and its back leg was caught in a piece of concertina wire, no doubt left behind by someone in the woods. Probably the very same trespasser who set the bear trap.

The wire was badly tangled in the cub's fur and had cut into its flesh, judging from the dark spots on the dirt floor of the shed. Even though the bear was clearly still a cub, it had

to weigh at least forty pounds. It also had claws. And teeth.

I knew that I should contact Animal Control, but Blevins's directive to call them in the future made me hesitate. Not just to spite Blevins, although that was admittedly part of the equation. The bigger issue was my concern that they might simply decide to put the little guy out of his misery.

But removing that wire was clearly not something I should attempt on my own, so I went inside to call the local vet. I'd already made her acquaintance as a result of Cronkite's annual checkup, which had come due not long after we arrived in Thistlewood. Angie Decker was a pleasant woman in her late sixties who didn't seem to have any intention of retiring. The town was too small to support

a full-time veterinarian, so she was only in the local office that adjoined her house two days a week. The rest of the time, she commuted to Maryville where she worked part time with another vet. I didn't know if she'd be willing to treat a wild animal or if she even made house calls but calling her seemed like the best option at hand.

I'd locked Cronkite's cat door before I left the house to go in search of Faircloth, and I thought it likely that he'd still be hiding out under Cassie's bed. He'd seemed pretty scared by the gunfire. But Cronkite was waiting in the living room, tail twitching nervously. He must have heard the bear whining.

"It's okay," I told him. "I'm calling Dr. Decker. We'll have the cub off your turf as soon as possible."

Unfortunately, Dr. Decker wasn't in the Thistlewood

office on Saturdays. I left a message on the local number, then called Maryville to see if I could track her down. But the office was only open until noon, so my call went to voicemail there, as well.

“Well,” I told Cronkite, “it looks as though we’re on our own. We can’t leave him out there to suffer.”

My cat gave me a skeptical look, which was probably warranted. Truthfully, I was far less worried about the cub attacking me than I was about a mother bear watching from the tree line and deciding I was at fault for hurting her cub. On the other hand, I thought there was a very good chance that the cub no longer *had* a mom, given what I’d just discovered in the woods.

I pulled on several layers of clothing, including my

heaviest jacket and an old pair of ski pants, and waddled out to the kitchen feeling a bit like the marshmallow man from the *Ghostbusters* movies. Then I grabbed the first aid kit from the pantry, along with a pair of barbecue mitts that came halfway up to my elbows. There was a set of wire clippers in the shed. I doubted that the cub would let me get close enough to help him, but I had to try.

The cub was definitely frightened, but to my surprise, he didn't pull away when I approached. It's possible that he was in too much pain to fight and he'd probably figured out that moving was tightening the wire even more. Or maybe he simply realized that I was trying to help. He whined several times, especially when I clipped the wire. But he didn't snarl or try to bite as I pulled it loose. I wanted to

apply a bandage, since removing the wire had increased the bleeding. He'd probably chew the bandage off, though, so I left it unwrapped.

I found an old plastic container and filled it with water for the cub, then went back inside. Cronkite arched his back and hissed, then shot down the hallway to hide under the bed again, apparently not pleased that I was bringing the scent of black bear into the house. There was a message waiting—Dr. Decker was on her way home and would stop by first. I glanced in the mirror and decided I looked truly ridiculous, so I peeled off a few layers and tossed them into the wash.

When Dr. Decker arrived, she checked the cub and applied some antiseptic to the wound.

“He’ll probably leave on his own by tomorrow,” she said. “Assuming he’s strong enough to walk. I don’t know how much blood he’s lost. And don’t worry—the mother will take him back, even though we’ve touched him. She’s probably watching from the woods, but she won’t attack to protect him. That’s more of a grizzly or brown bear trait. She’ll hang around, though. Black bear cubs generally hibernate with their mothers for a second winter.”

“Except...I don’t think his mama is still in the picture.” I described the body I’d found in the woods.

As I’d expected, her blue eyes narrowed behind the steel-rimmed glasses. “Bear trapping is illegal! Did you call the police?”

I gave her a run-down of my chat with Blevins and she

wrinkled her petite nose. “Why am I not surprised? Does he know about our friend here?” she asked, nodding toward the cub.

“No. I discovered Remy after the sheriff left.”

“You *named* him? Not a good idea, Ruth.”

I blushed slightly, and then said, “Well, I needed to call him something, and I thought he was a big rat when I first saw him. Which reminded me of the movie, *Ratatouille*, so... he’s Remy for now. Anyway, Blevins doesn’t know about him. Do you think I should call him? Or Animal Control?”

“No,” she said. “Just...if the bear doesn’t leave on his own within the next few days, give me a call. He’ll probably go back to the cave where he hibernated with his mother last year on instinct. But I have a game warden friend. Maybe he

can check around to see if there's another mother bear in the vicinity. Sometimes, they'll take in a stray cub." The vet lowered her voice slightly, even though it was only the two of us and the bear. "I don't really trust Blevins," she confided.

"Neither do I. Should I...feed him? Not Blevins. The cub."

The vet hesitated. "Give him more water. If he's still here tomorrow, give him a bit of food, but not so much that he'll want to stay once he's well enough to forage. Carrots, maybe some fish. Leave the shed door open. And *don't* get attached. No more calling him cutesy names. With any luck, he'll be gone by morning."

☆ Chapter Four ☆

THE ANIMAL CONTROL truck pulled into the driveway around three to tell me that they were heading into my woods in order to remove the bear. A few minutes later, I went out back to check on the cub. He was snoozing in the same corner but lifted his head briefly when I stepped inside the shed.

“I need to go into town for a bit,” I told him, feeling a little silly. “And you need to get well so that you can go back to the woods. You’re making my cat very nervous.”

That was something of an understatement, actually. And more to the point, he was making my cat *mad*. This was Cronkite’s turf, and he had no intention of sharing it with any creature incapable of using a can opener to serve him breakfast. He was most definitely opposed to sharing his turf with a bear, and the fact that I was apparently taking care of said bear meant that I was on Cronk’s naughty list, as well.

Cronkite was also unhappy that his cat door remained locked and his litter box was now inside instead of in its usual covered nook on the far side of the deck. I didn’t think Cronk would go anywhere near the cub, but I was still a bit

worried about the possibility of additional traps in the woods. Or gunshots, for that matter.

After tending to my furry guest, I grabbed my purse and headed to my second home—the office of the town’s once and future weekly newspaper, the *Thistlewood Star*. I’d worked here alongside the previous owner, Jim Dealey, even before I could legally hold a job. He’d paid me in books at first, increasing my responsibilities over the years until I went off to college.

When Mr. Dealey died five years back, the paper had closed. It was never especially profitable, so I hadn’t been too surprised to see that no one had purchased it. I had, however, been surprised when Wren informed me, right after I’d told her about my impending divorce, that the

building hadn't been sold and all of the equipment was still in place. Dealey's son never had any interest in journalism, but I guess he'd been holding out hope that a buyer would come along who was willing to keep the paper alive. He'd given me a decent price, saying he knew how happy it would have made his dad to have me revive the *Star*. And thanks to my early retirement and some money I'd inherited from my folks, I didn't really need the paper to turn a profit. As long as it didn't lose much, I'd be fine.

My goal was to get the *Star* back up and running—not just the online version, which Mr. Dealey had grudgingly added about a decade back, but also the print edition. The latter was something that many people, including my daughter, considered a bit of a fool's errand in an era when

print papers were on the endangered species list. But the *Star's* ink still ran through my veins, no matter how far I had wandered. A website alone wouldn't be the same. I also thought tourists might be interested in seeing how papers were printed back in the olden days. And I did mean *olden*. Some of the equipment I hoped to resuscitate was more than a century old.

I pulled my Jeep Wrangler into the parking lot behind the strip of stores and offices that faced Main Street and unlocked the back door. This entrance led into what Mr. Dealey had called the press room, which housed the ancient Heidelberg platen press and other equipment. When I first began working at the *Star*, we'd set the paper by hand, painstakingly forming each line by arranging the type sorts

—letters, spacers, and punctuation marks—onto metal composing sticks, which we would then group together in a frame, slowly building the copy for each page. Then we'd ink the platen press and print the copies. It was a tedious process, and the press could be finicky. Mr. Dealey's wife, who had helped him with this and many other tasks at the paper, had nicknamed the press Stella back when they were dating, since he was always yelling at the thing. I didn't think Mr. Dealey looked much like Marlon Brando—more like Jimmy Stewart, actually—but the nickname stuck. The press would always be Stella to me.

After Joanna Dealey died during my junior year of high school, her husband bought the used Linotype machine that takes up most of one corner. I'd been heading off to college

the next year and it was simply too much for one man in his sixties to put out the paper each week entirely by hand. As far as I knew, he'd never gotten around to naming the Linotype, possibly because he viewed the purchase as a concession to advancing age and a reminder that Joanna was gone. I'd decided to call the machine Blanche, continuing the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* theme. But it was hot lead, rather than hot tin, that held the type sorts together to form each line of print. And that hot lead would leak onto the floor if you weren't diligent about emptying the overflow bucket.

The back wall of the press room was lined with font cases. There had been dozens of them back in the 1980s, and Mr. Dealey had added even more during the decades I lived in Nashville. Fonts were sort of a hobby for Dealey. I think it

was partly that he found the small metal pieces intriguing, but he also needed extra fonts for the obituaries. After taking over the paper from his father, Mr. Dealey decided that each person who died in our tiny town deserved an obituary that was special, with a separate font for his or her final moment in the spotlight. Even if you counted bold, italic, and so forth, that was still a lot of fonts. At some point, I'd probably have to begin doubling up, but I planned to continue the tradition for as long as I could.

Even though the paper was not yet up and running, I had spent most of my working life as a reporter. If Steve Blevins wasn't willing to investigate the trapping case, then it was up to me. I'd considered simply marching over to Ben Faircloth's place and asking him straight out whether he was

the one who'd set the trap. But given that he hadn't exactly followed my directive to stop hunting on my land, I was under no illusion that he'd actually *admit* to setting the trap.

Thistlewood was, however, very much your typical small town. No one really stuck to his or her own business. If Ben or anyone else had been trapping bear, I thought it quite likely that at least a few people in town would know.

So I spent the next few minutes putting together a poster offering a fifty-dollar reward for information leading to the arrest of the individual responsible for setting a trap on my property. I still wasn't certain that I'd actually press charges, but I'd pay the reward either way. The goal was simply to have something other than my suspicions to present to Blevins. If I had evidence, surely he'd have to take action?

What I was working on wasn't actually an obituary, but it was as close as the poor bear would get. So I thumbed through Mr. Dealey's font list, searching for something he hadn't used. The font faces that had been used previously had a name and date penciled in the margin. Baskerville Standard Bold was unassigned, so I added the single word *Bear* and the date. Once I'd changed the font—something that was far easier to do digitally than on the Linotype machine—I printed out two copies and taped the first one to the plate glass window at the front of the office. The second one I planned to carry across the street to Pat's Diner, where I was heading to meet Wren and Ed for dinner. Patsy Grimes, the owner, kept a community bulletin board near the cash register. If she'd let me post a copy there, most of

the town would see it over the next few days.

A cold, bitter wind whipped down Main Street as I stepped outside. I didn't really mind chilly weather, but winters always seem to drag on in Thistlewood, partly because so many of the residents had seasonal jobs. Much like bears, the people in the town entered a sort of winter hibernation once the first snow arrived, resting up for the tourist season, when they'd have to put in long hours with little time for rest or relaxation.

Pat's Diner was at the end of the block, a shiny rectangle of chrome and neon located directly across from the courthouse. For the past few months, I'd walked the short stretch from the office to the diner almost every day, and not once had I seen Blevins. Today, however, he was stepping

out the front door just as I passed.

“Well, you keep flipping in like a bad penny, don’t you?”
he said.

I was pretty sure the phrase was *turning up like a bad penny*, but far be it from me to correct the self-professed king of Woodward County.

When I didn’t respond, he glanced down at my hand and asked, “Whatcha got there?”

I wished I’d had the foresight to slip the poster into my bag. A tiny obstinate part of me was tempted to wad it up or simply tell Blevins it was none of his beeswax. But he’d see the poster soon enough, so I held it out in front of me.

“I’m not inclined to simply drop the matter. Before I left the house this afternoon, I saw a cub. Alone.”

“Really? What do you want me to do, Ruth? Call Bear Social Services?” He laughed at his lame joke, cackling loud enough to disturb a group of crows that had been perched on the eaves of the courthouse. They cawed and took to the sky in a rush of wind and feathers.

“Besides,” Blevins continued, “The dead bear is male. Sorry if that messes up your plans. I mean, I’m sure the world will be devastated to learn that you’re having to cancel the black bear version of *Bambi*.”

I snorted. “Wouldn’t have pegged you as a Disney fan.”

“Well, I guess you don’t know as much as you think you do, Townsend.” He gave me a smug grin and walked off toward his car, which was illegally parked at the curb, singing the chorus to “The Bear Necessities,” from *The Jungle*

Book.

I gritted my teeth and turned toward the diner.

The most annoying part? Blevins actually had a good voice, and now the song was going to be stuck in my head.

☆ Chapter Five ☆

PATSY GLANCED at the poster and arched one penciled-in eyebrow. “I don’t mind if you post it,” she said. “But there are people around here who will say good riddance. To be honest, I’m one of them. At least once a year, my trash gets tipped over by a bear. And there’s plenty of folks around here that hunt ’em, so...”

“I don’t have a problem with the hunters,” I told her. “As long as they don’t do it on my land. My problem is the bear trap. I hike in those woods. So does Cassie when she’s here.”

Patsy sighed. “You’re right on that count. Puttin’ a trap in the woods like that ain’t safe. Go ahead and tack your poster to the board.”

I moved over to the bulletin board, looking for an empty space.

“Just yank down that flyer for Mary Ellis’s yard sale. It was yesterday.” Patsy dropped her voice. “Didn’t have a darn thing worth buyin’ either. Are you here by yourself tonight, sweetie, or...?” Her smile widened as the bell above the door jingled. “Well, I guess that answers my question.”

I pushed the tack in to hold the flyer and then turned to

see Wren Lawson, best friend extraordinaire, opening the door.

“Ed Shelton is joining us, too,” I told Patsy as Wren and I headed to the booth at the rear of the restaurant that had been our preferred seating since we were in high school. If it was occupied, I’d sit somewhere else, but Wren refused on principle. She’d just order take-out and head back home.

Back in high school, there had been three in our group. Tanya Blackburn waited tables here during her junior and senior years, before she supposedly took off for the bright lights of Nashville without telling a soul. No one had heard from her since. Wren and I hadn’t bought that story at the time. More than thirty years later, we still didn’t buy it.

“I saw you talking to Sheriff High-and-Mighty when I

came around the corner,” Wren said. “Since when do you consort with the enemy?”

Wren’s place is easy walking distance from the diner. She runs the funeral home over on James Street, two blocks away. While I’d have sworn that I’d never move back to Thistlewood, I’d have sworn on a stack of Bibles ten feet high that Wren wouldn’t. Wren’s objective when she’d entered the Army straight out of high school had been twofold: to specialize in medicine and to get out of Thistlewood. The second had been inevitable once she enlisted, and the recruiter had *sort of* kept his promise on the first. She’d wound up working on human bodies, but they’d been beyond help by the time they reached her. To Wren’s surprise, she’d actually found the work rewarding. She’d

come back to Thistlewood at the end of twenty years in the military to take care of the grandmother who had helped raise her. When the owner of Memory Grove decided to retire to Florida, she'd bought the business and moved into the apartment above the funeral home.

Wren's decision had been a bit controversial in a town like Thistlewood, where the population is more than ninety-five percent Caucasian. Back when we were in high school, I couldn't have imagined a minority-owned business of any sort surviving for long. But most of the residents have evolved in the past three decades. Sure, some people had decided to take their business to Maryville or one of the other nearby towns when a loved one passed away. They weren't the majority, but there were always a few. A few

bad pennies, to use Steve Blevins's term.

I suspected Blevins was one of those bad pennies. When Wren had moved to town back in the early 1980s, he had pulled me aside and cautioned me about being friends with *someone like her*. It hadn't taken a rocket scientist to figure out what he'd meant. Maybe he'd evolved too, but given that his other obnoxious traits seemed unchanged, I kind of doubted it.

"I didn't have much choice but to talk to him," I told Wren, and then explained about finding the bear in the woods and calling the sheriff's office to report it.

"So he's not going to do *anything*?" she said indignantly. "What if you'd been the one to set off the trap? Or Cassie? That can't be legal!"

“That sounds like my cue,” Ed Shelton said. “What sort of illegal activity are the two of you planning?”

I moved over so that Ed could slide into the booth next to me. He winced slightly, favoring the hip that was injured seven years back. The accident had forced him to retire from his job as sheriff, and now he solves fictional crimes. His first mystery had been published earlier in the year, and he was hard at work on the second one.

Even though I could tell that Wren was still miffed about the bear trap, she gave me a little conspiratorial grin, which I pointedly ignored. She was convinced that Ed had, as she put it, *the hots* for me. I had explained that it was entirely possible for an adult man and an adult woman to simply be friends. Wren agreed, in principle, that it was *possible*, but

disagreed in this specific case, insisting that Ed did indeed have the hots for me. Or at the very least, a crush.

I'd gradually decided that she might be right. And I'd also decided that I might be okay with that. That it might even be reciprocal.

"Someone set a bear trap on Ruth's property," Wren said. "They left the body and took the head for a trophy."

Patsy arrived to take our order, holding a pen and a small notepad as always. I was pretty sure it was the same notepad she'd been using since she started waiting tables here back when her mom and dad ran the place. I'd eaten here hundreds of times and had rarely seen her write down an order. She went almost entirely on memory. On slow nights, like this one, she walked the order back to the kitchen, but in

the height of the summer when every table was full, she'd yell it to the cook in diner jargon to save time.

After Patsy left, I started my story over, bringing Ed up to speed. Then I told them both about finding Remy in the shed. "I assumed the bear in my woods was his mother, but Blevins told me that Animal Control determined that it was male. Black bears don't have mates that stick around, do they?"

Ed shook his head. "I don't think so. Could just be coincidence that they were in the same area. Or Blevins could be lying. Wouldn't be the first time. As for leaving the body, the game warden plays poker with my group occasionally. He was talking only a few weeks ago about trophy hunting being on the rise. I mean, I *get* hunting bear

if you're gonna eat the meat—"

Wren wrinkled her nose and Ed laughed. "Bear steak is a little gamey," he said, "but if you cut it into strips and deep fry it like my mama used to do, it's not half bad."

I narrowed my eyes teasingly. "You stay away from Remy, Ed Shelton. I didn't dress up like the Michelin Man and unwind that wire from his paw just to have him end up on your dinner plate."

He grinned at me. "Wouldn't dream of it. You gave that bear a name, and even if bear steak tasted like filet mignon, that would kind of kill my appetite. Especially since you named it after a rat."

Patsy chose that moment to arrive with our food.

"Hey, Patsy," I said. "Didn't you tell me that Ed's

cheeseburger used to be a cow named Murray?"

She gave me a look like I'd just dropped in from Mars, and then went off shaking her head when we started laughing. Ed took a big bite and thanked Murray for his service, at which point we cracked up again.

In the middle of laughing, I thought of Remy's dad—because even if bears didn't pair bond, I'd managed to convince myself that's exactly who the dead bear was—looking down with glass eyes from above someone's fireplace. That sobered me right up.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked.

"I don't care what Blevins says. Whoever did this needs to know they can't go around putting traps in other people's yards."

Wren took a bite of her salad and gave me a hesitant look. “Where have you put up flyers?”

“Here and at the office. Why?”

“As much as I hate to agree with Steve Blevins about anything,” she said, “he may be right about this, Ruth. Lots of people hunt around here. I’m worried you could drum up more opposition than support.”

“True,” Ed said, “but most hunters don’t have much respect for anyone who kills for a trophy and leaves the meat to rot. Plus, bear trapping *is* illegal. I just...” He stopped and shook his head. “I can’t picture Ben Faircloth doing something like that. I’ll admit I haven’t seen that much of him recently. He’s getting up in years and I don’t think him or Betty either one gets out much anymore. But I’ve known

Ben since I was a kid. He's not a bad guy, Ruth. I can't see him doing anything illegal."

"Maybe. But he persisted even after I explicitly told him not to hunt on my property. I haven't seen anyone else out there, so..."

Wren leaned forward across the table. "You could always ask your *other* neighbor," she said with a slight lift to her eyebrows. "You know. The one who asked you out?"

Ed turned to me. "I arrive a few minutes late and miss out on all of the fun stuff. Who is this mystery neighbor who asked you out?"

I gave Wren a perturbed look. "She means Gary Webb. And that was ages ago—"

"Nope," she said. "Not if he repeated the invitation this

morning. That starts the clock ticking again.”

I gave her a thin smile, making it clear that I didn’t find the current discussion amusing. We’ve been friends since we were thirteen, so she interpreted the look instantly and shifted gears.

“What I meant to say, is that maybe Webb has seen something. He lives right next to Faircloth.”

“I actually *did* mention my suspicions to Gary Webb. And he seemed to agree that it could be Faircloth.”

“Well,” Ed said, “there’s a real easy way to find out.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and nodded toward my barely-touched sandwich. “Finish up your dinner and we’ll go ask him.”

☆ Chapter Six ☆

BEN FAIRCLOTH LIVED IN A RAMBLING, two-story farmhouse that had seen better days. The ancient tree fort in the large oak in the front yard, along with the tire swing that hung from a branch on the opposite side, suggested that many of those days had been happy ones, filled with the laughter of children or grandchildren. Faircloth's house was

situated at the end of a long, bumpy driveway in desperate need of fresh gravel. Back in the eighties, the house couldn't even be seen from the main road for all the trees, but they'd cleared most of the land since then.

"Thanks for coming out here with me," I told Ed as he parked the truck near Faircloth's front porch. I'd asked Wren if she wanted to come with us, but she had claimed to have some work she needed to catch up on. I suspected that wasn't true and she simply wanted to give her theory about Ed's interest in me a chance to take root.

"I'm happy to help. I settled a lot of disputes between neighbors as sheriff. Not that this is a typical dispute," Ed added quickly. "I mean, from what you've said, Ben has definitely been trespassing, and if Ben set that bear trap,

that's two laws that he's broken. It's just...he never struck me as a type to be wasteful. I can't see him leaving a perfectly good bear in the woods."

I sighed. "Well, someone did. And, listen...even if it was him, if he admits he did it and says he'll stop, I won't press charges. I'm really *not* trying to stir up trouble. But I don't like the idea of one of those traps catching my cat. Or me or my daughter. And he can't keep leaving strands of barbed wire around, either. I mean, I don't *know* that Remy picked that up on my property, but the cub couldn't have traveled far like that."

"You're probably right," he said.

We stepped out into the chill of the night. Loose gravel crunched beneath our shoes as we made our way up the

short walkway to the porch. Ed knocked a few times and then we waited. I had a strange sense of déjà vu standing there, like maybe I'd climbed those steps years ago selling candy bars or magazines to raise money for band uniforms or maybe the senior trip.

The curtain on the front door drew back and an elderly woman, probably in her eighties, peered out. She seemed vaguely familiar. For a moment, she simply stared at us. Then, she let the curtain fall back into place and opened the door.

"Sheriff Shelton. We haven't seen you in ages. Is everything okay?"

Ed laughed softly. "It's just Ed now, Mrs. Faircloth."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess old habits die hard."

Ed cleared his throat. "This is my friend, Ruth Townsend. She's a neighbor of yours."

The woman cocked her head to the side. "Are you back at your mama and daddy's place, then?"

"Yes, ma'am. Moved back a few months ago. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Faircloth. I'm sorry I haven't gotten around to it before now."

"It's Betty," she said. "And we've met. It's been a long time, though. I remember you back when you were a girl. You used to cut through the woods on the way over to the Lawson place."

I waited, half expecting her to press her lips in disapproval of my friendship with Wren, which had been the norm for most of the older folks back when I was in high

school. But she didn't. It was just a simple statement of fact.

"Can we come in for a minute?" Ed said. "We have a few questions for Ben."

Betty nodded hesitantly. "Well...he's here but I don't know how much luck you'll have with any questions. If you had stopped by a few hours ago, maybe. But come on in, anyway."

We entered a long hallway with winter coats hanging from hooks above several pairs of muddy boots. Off to my left, I heard the sound of a television playing, with applause and laughter from an audience that sounded way too enthusiastic to be real.

"He's in the living room," Betty said. "We just finished up our dinner."

We stepped into a large room with high ceilings. The fireplace against the far wall looked as if it hadn't been used in a long time. A large, boxy television—the kind with actual knobs on the side of the screen—sat on top of an even older console model. Some nineties sitcom was on, hence the canned laughter.

The thing that struck me immediately was that there were no hunting trophies on the walls. Not even deer heads, which were pretty standard home decor in Thistlewood, or a stuffed fish. The room was decorated with a few photographs, some framed pieces of embroidery, and an ornate gold mirror that looked entirely out of place. A colorful quilt was draped over the back of the couch.

Ben Faircloth was half asleep in a recliner. He didn't so

much as twitch when we entered the room. Betty crossed over and stood between him and the TV. Bending down slowly, she put her arms on either side of his chair so that she was eye-level with her husband.

“Ben, sweetheart? We have visitors. Isn’t that nice?”

He grunted. I couldn’t tell if that meant *yes* or *no*.

She looked up at Ed and smiled. “It’s Ed Shelton.”

Ed took a few steps toward the chair. “Hey there, Ben. You doin’ okay?” When the man nodded, he continued. “We just stopped by to ask you a few questions. Won’t take but a minute.”

“Okay,” Ben told him, glancing over at me a little warily.

Ed seemed to be waiting for me to speak, but I nodded for him to go ahead. He knew the old guy a lot better than I

did. If there was any information to be had, I suspected Ed would have better luck obtaining it than I would.

“This is my friend, Ruth,” Ed told him. “She lives down the road from you. I think you two have met before. She found something in the woods today, over on her property.”

“Under the tree stand,” I added.

“What was it?” Ben asked.

“A bear,” Ed answered. “A dead one. Someone set a trap. Took the trophy and left the meat behind. Do you know anything about that, Ben?”

The man’s eyes fluttered, and I thought he might be falling asleep. But then he said, “No. I seen a bear a few years back, but nothin’ since. I bought those trash cans that lock down tight, so they don’t bother us none.”

Betty was frowning now, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She motioned for us to follow her back into the hallway. “Why would you think Ben had anything to do with a bear trap?”

I cleared my throat. “It’s just that...I’ve caught him a few times hunting on my property. I’ve asked him not to. I hike in those woods. So does my daughter when she visits. Also, the gunfire scares my cat. I heard shots again this morning, and when I saw the trap—well, he was the first person who came to mind.”

Betty nodded as if she understood. “It wasn’t Ben, though,” she said softly as the sound of the man’s soft snores filled the air. “He doesn’t do any hunting these days.”

I paired her statement with what I had seen. Ben

stomping through the woods with his rifle slung over his shoulder. Ben up in the tree stand. "But, I—"

Betty cut me off politely. "I know you've seen him with the gun. But it's only twelve-gauge shellcrackers. Blanks. He's been slipping for the past few years, and me and the kids wouldn't trust him with live ammo anymore." She sighed heavily. "Hunting makes him happy, though. It reminds him of when he was boy, hunting the woods around here with his daddy. And as long as he *thinks* he's shooting something, he's happy. But he definitely doesn't have any traps. Never did." Betty tilted her head and looked at her sleeping husband. "That kind of thing wouldn't be Ben's style, and he sure as heck wouldn't have left the meat to rot. That just attracts scavengers, and we still keep chickens."

I swallowed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Betty gave my arm a squeeze. "Well, of course, you didn't, sugar. If I'd been in your position, I'd have thought the same thing. I'll get my sons to take Ben out to their land to shoot from now on. We can't have him scaring your cat. We had cats all over the farm when the kids were growing up, and heaven knows, those creatures are skittish enough as it is."

She walked us to the front door, where I apologized again. "It's okay," she said. "Really. And Ruth...don't be a stranger, you hear? Come by and visit sometime."

I promised that I would. Then Ed and I returned to his truck and made our way back down the rutted drive toward the highway. I expected Ed to turn the truck left, but he took

a right instead, toward my place.

“Aren’t we going back to the diner?” I asked. “My Jeep is parked behind the office.”

“We’ll head back to the diner shortly,” he told me. “But first I want to see this baby bear you’ve adopted.”

☆ Chapter Seven ☆

THE CLOUDS HAD CLEARED, revealing a full, bright moon that illuminated the ground like an ocean of silver. Ed and I almost didn't need the flashlight as we made our way behind my house to the wooden shed. I hoped Remy was still there. Not only did I want to see how the little guy was doing, I wanted Ed to see him, too.

“Nice night.” Ed tilted his head back, glancing up at the sky.

“It is. I still can’t get over how many stars you can see out here.” I smiled. Being around Ed felt easy. Natural. Safe. I thought I could get used to this.

“Hope your guest won’t mind me taking a peek,” he said.

“I think you’ll find him a pretty agreeable little guy. Cronkite is the one with the attitude.”

We stood in the doorway of the shed for a moment, neither of us saying anything. From the corner of the shed there came a rustle of something moving around clumsily, and then a soft whimper.

“Remy,” I called softly into the darkness. “I brought you a visitor.”

Ed clicked his flashlight on and aimed it into the small building. The light caught Remy's furry little face and large brown eyes.

"Well, I'll be," Ed said as he stepped into the shed. "He *is* kinda cute, isn't he? How's it going, buddy? Are the accommodations to your liking?"

Remy looked up at Ed, then at me. He gave us a big yawn, and then stretched back out on the old blanket I'd put in his corner.

"Guess that's a *yes*." I said as the cub put his head back down on his paws.

"Looks like he's still a bit worn out," Ed noted.

"Yeah. He's had a rough day. That concertina wire was pretty deeply embedded. Sweet dreams, Remy. I'll be back

out in the morning to check on you.”

“So what are you going to do with him?” Ed asked as we walked back toward the house.

I shrugged. “The vet said he’d leave when he was ready. She thinks the mama bear is probably watching from the woods. If he’s still here in the morning, I’ll put out a bit of food. I’m just glad I can offer him a safe spot to recuperate. Too bad my other resident beast isn’t happy to have him here.”

“Your cat?”

“Yep. And speaking of, he’s going to be furious if you leave before he has a chance to check you out. Cronkite considers himself the resident guard cat.”

Ed stopped and pointed the flashlight down near our

feet. “Hey, take a look at this.”

It was a bear print, too large to be made by the cub in my shed. A shiver ran through me as Ed paced toward the woods, following the tracks.

“Were those here earlier?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then I guess Dr. Decker was right about the mama bear keeping watch,” he said.

“I hope she was also right about the mama bear not attacking to protect her baby. He was whimpering pretty loud when I removed that razor wire.”

“Black bears almost never attack humans for *any* reason,” Ed told me. “But you might want to park extra close to your front door for a couple of days if those prints make you

nervous.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said.

We went around to the front and I unlocked the door. “Welcome to Casa Townsend,” I told Ed as I stepped aside so that he could enter.

Stepping into this house had always felt coming like home even when I lived in Nashville and we only visited in the summer. I hadn’t changed the furniture since my parents about ten years ago, so I guess it was dated. It looked pretty much the way my mom had kept it. The sweet scent of cinnamon apple from the unlit candles filled the room, exactly as it had back then. Large, colorful rugs covered the hardwood floors, as they had for as long as I could remember.

Home. This house was home and always had been. When I was younger, I'd wished that it wasn't located in Thistlewood, but the town was kind of growing on me now that I'd returned. I couldn't have been happy living here when I was thirty or even forty. Nashville suited me well, back then. But now, on the cusp of fifty, the slower pace wasn't so bad. I missed my daughter, but Thistlewood was starting to feel almost as much like home as this house did. I had Ed and Wren to thank for that.

He looked around the room and I tried to imagine what he must be seeing with fresh eyes. Did he like it?

He nodded slowly, and then smiled. "Nice place. Almost like one of those cabins in a painting, isn't it?"

"Thanks. This was Mom and Dad's oasis. We vacationed

here and came up for the occasional weekend when I was small, back when we lived in Knoxville. Then my dad decided he'd rather live here and commute into the city. My mom got a job in Pigeon Forge. I don't think they ever regretted the move."

We both turned at the sound of something scurrying quickly across the kitchen floor. Cronkite skidded to a halt before he rounded the corner and then came ambling into the room, taking his own sweet time as he circled Ed suspiciously.

"You old fraud," I told the cat. "Like we couldn't hear you running across the floor only a second ago."

"Well, you're an impressive looking fella, now aren't you?" Ed said, bending down to hold his hand out. "I've

never met a Maine coon cat before. I think I can see why you named him Cronkite. He has a certain air of gravitas. I could see this guy hosting the nightly cat news. I don't think he likes me, though."

"He's just not sure of you." Cronk finally gave Ed's hand a sniff and a nudge, and then allowed Ed to pet him. Once, twice, and then he was over it—leaving us both behind with a flick of his tail as he went to sit on the bottom step.

"He's sizing you up," I told Ed. "Making sure you aren't a serial killer planning to off us in the middle of the night."

"Did I pass?"

"Your hand is still in one piece, isn't it?" I said lightly.

"It is."

"Then you passed." I cleared my throat. "Listen, thanks

for going over to see the Faircloths with me. I doubt Ben would've spoken if it was only me."

"It was no problem at all."

"Are you ready to head back?" I asked. "I don't want to keep you out all night."

"I'm ready if you are. But you're not keeping me from anything. I've had a good time tonight."

"Me, too." We exchanged a smile and headed back to his truck. Once we were out on the highway, we passed the Faircloths' driveway, then rounded the small curve that took us along the edge of Gary Webb's property. I'm not sure why I looked that direction. Maybe I was feeling a little guilty about driving past with another guy—a guy I found far more appealing, to be honest—when Gary had been so open in

expressing his interest in me. Which was silly, but...

Webb had a shed out back, about the same distance from the house as my own, but it had one noticeable difference—it was fenced in, along with a small section of the yard. A garden, I guessed. The fence was chain link, but something looked different about the top edge.

While I couldn't be sure from this distance, it looked like razor wire.

I almost asked Ed to stop the truck. My mouth even opened, the words right on the tip of my tongue, but I pulled them back at the last second. I had already been wrong, dead wrong, about one of my neighbors. If I kept that up, Ed was going to think I was paranoid.

And maybe I was.

But that wasn't going to keep me from having a look on my own. I have no qualms about playing the fool when there's no one around to see me.

Mostly to keep my mind off whatever was waiting back at Gary Webb's place, I took a deep breath and asked a question that had been on my mind for a few weeks.

"What's up with you and Steve Blevins?" I said, firmly aware that the question came out of nowhere for Ed. "Wren has told me a little, but she's going on the town's common knowledge, and we all know how wrong that can be."

If Ed was at all taken aback by my abrupt change of subject, he didn't show it. He glanced over at me as he turned out onto the main highway that leads into town. "I assume you know about my accident?"

“A little. I know a car sideswiped you while you were making a traffic stop.”

He nodded. “Darn near killed me, too. I’m sure the driver was drunk. I’m also sure it was Derrick Blevins.”

Wren had said Ed suspected it was the sheriff’s son, but I hadn’t realized he was this certain about the driver’s identity.

“I couldn’t prove it, of course,” Ed continued. “I had the make and color of the car and a partial read on the license plate. But Derrick Blevins had a solid alibi. All were family members, but one of them was his maternal grandfather, who also happens to be a county judge. The judge said Derrick was at their place New Year’s Eve. That he’d stopped by to ring in the new year with Gram and Gramps. But I

know the truth. And Blevins knows that I know."

"You'd think that would make him be nicer to you," I laughed. "Oh, who am I kidding?"

"Yeah, that's not exactly Steve's style. He sees me as a political threat, too. Not that I could handle the physical side of the job since the accident, but if someone runs against him, I could probably sway a few voters in his opponent's direction. More than a few, if I'm perfectly honest."

I thought about that for a moment. Ed was far better liked than the current sheriff. Ben and Betty Faircloth had shown nothing but respect for the man sitting next to me. Same with the interactions I'd witnessed between Ed and the patrons at Pat's Diner.

"Derrick was young back then," Ed said. "Young, and

stupid, and very drunk. He's older now, and might drink a little less, but he's every bit as stupid. It's a miracle he hasn't killed anyone yet. Kid has a thing for muscle cars." He shifted slightly in his seat as we came into town. "One of these days he's going to get himself into trouble that his daddy won't be able to get him out of. Karma has a way of catching up to you eventually."

I shivered in the cab, thinking that Ed was probably right. The fact that there hadn't been any consequences for hurting Ed had probably convinced Derrick Blevins that he was infallible. Untouchable. I hoped that attitude didn't cost someone their life before he learned otherwise.

We pulled into the lot behind my office, now empty except for my Wrangler.

“Thanks again for tonight,” I said as I opened the truck door.

“Anytime. And I mean that.”

I smiled and was about to shut the door when Ed cleared his throat and spoke again. “You might eventually find out who killed the bear, Ruth, but Blevins will probably laugh in your face. I’m not saying you shouldn’t investigate if not knowing is going to bug you—it would probably bug the heck out of me. But don’t assume Blevins will do anything about it, even if you present him with irrefutable evidence. That’s just not his way. And if I’m wrong, I owe you pie and coffee at the diner.”

“Understood.” I gave him a sassy grin. “You *do* know I’m going to take that as a challenge, right? And as a heads-up...I

like my pie à la mode, so you'd better start saving your nickels."

★ Chapter Eight ★

GARY WEBB'S house was a solid block of darkness against the backdrop of the starry night sky. Nothing moved, nothing stirred, and although it wasn't that late, I knew I had to hurry. Webb could return home at any moment, and I'd have a tough time explaining why I was snooping around.

Parking my Wrangler along the side of the road closest to the shed, I set off on foot. I shivered and pulled my jacket around my shoulders. Now that the clouds had lifted, what little warmth the day had managed to build up was gone. My teeth were starting to chatter, although I knew the weather wasn't entirely to blame. It had been over a decade since I'd done any investigative reporting. Sneaking around in the middle of the night definitely got your adrenaline going.

A cold breeze rustled through the tight band of trees that stood sentry along the edge of the moonlit garden. The limbs rubbed against each other with a sound chillingly akin to a whisper. *We see you*, they seemed to say. *We're watching*. I couldn't help but wonder what other sounds they might be

masking with their chorus. Perhaps the sound of a dusty old truck clattering back home?

I pushed the thought aside and focused instead on the fence surrounding the shed and garden. It was indeed concertina wire, just as I had thought when I'd seen it from the road. The loops of razor wire around the top looked like a spiraling mouth filled with teeth waiting to strike. And the wire wasn't only on the fence. Whoever had installed it—Webb, presumably—had apparently done so recently, and hadn't bothered to clear away the scraps. Several smaller sections were scattered about on the ground.

Why was that sort of barrier needed around a garden? I supposed that you might need a fence to keep animals from nibbling on your crops, but why waste money fencing in the

shed, too?

I didn't know, but one thing *was* certain—this was where Remy had picked up the strand of wire. The thought sent my blood boiling. What was Webb hiding that required razor wire?

There was a big, fat padlock on the gate, and another one on the door, which meant I wouldn't be getting inside the shack find out. Along the fence, several trash bags fluttered in the wind, some held down by jugs of paint thinner, and the same dense ammonia smell I'd noticed that morning was on the wind. But I didn't see any sign of cats.

Despite my nerves, I chuckled. If Webb pulled up and caught me here, I guessed I could say Cronkite had wandered off. I'd followed the smell of cat urine, hoping to

track him down.

Some sixth sense told me it was time to leave. But first, I needed to get a look inside that house. The wire scattered on the ground told me that Gary Webb was careless enough to injure a bear cub, but I still didn't have any evidence to connect him to the bear trap itself.

I pulled my phone out and snapped a few pictures of the concertina wire. Then, I ran across the yard to Webb's house, keeping a careful eye out to avoid stepping on any other wire fragments. When I reached the house, I went around to the back. More garbage bags were piled up near the trash bin, along with a collection of cigarette butts and crushed beer cans. All of this smelled more like your typical trash, though—unpleasant, but it didn't stink the inside of your

nose like the trash around the shed.

It was darker behind the house, due to the tree cover, so I opened the flashlight app on my phone. Then I moved to the first step and trained the beam of light on an uncovered window.

The living room, apparently. Several pairs of glassy eyes stared back at me from the far wall. A boar, three deer, and a bear, which I knew couldn't be the same one I had found in the woods earlier. Webb wouldn't have had time to get that particular trophy mounted yet.

I moved all the way onto the porch in order to get a better shot. There was a click above me, and the back porch was cast in the harsh white glow of two floodlights situated on either end of the porch. I jumped back and almost

dropped my phone. Had Gary somehow sneaked up the driveway and entered the house? Or maybe he'd been here all along, huddled in the dark?

But then I heard a high-pitched whirring sound. Looking up, I noticed for the first time the small, black head of a security camera, its vacant face pivoting toward my own like something from a science fiction movie.

Snap. The unmistakable sound of a picture being taken.
Snap. Snap. Snap.

Well, that wasn't good. Gary Webb had an automated security system. His smartphone was probably singing away in his pocket right this second, wherever he was. *Intruder Alert! Intruder Alert!* And when he clicked to pull up more information, it was my startled face that he'd see on the

screen.

I turned and jumped the two steps to the ground, landing squarely in a patch of mud that very nearly cost me my balance. I kept going, though, slipping around the side of the house and then taking off at a jog through the darkness toward my Jeep.

When I reached the Wrangler, I piled in. Out of breath and sweating, I sat frozen for a moment, trying to decide what to do next. Back up and go home? Bad idea. That would be the first place Webb would look.

Pat's Diner, then. Pat's was always full of people. Always brightly lit. Webb might find me at Pat's, since it was probably the second place he would look. But at least I wouldn't be alone.

★ Chapter Nine ★

THE SHORT DRIVE into town seemed to take forever. At every turn, I expected to see Webb's headlights looming large and white in my rearview mirror. When I finally made it to the parking lot of Pat's Diner, I pulled the Jeep into a spot within clear view of the windows. I really wanted to dash straight inside, but if what I suspected was true, I was

going to need to make a 911 call in just a moment. That would probably attract more attention than I wanted if I did it inside the diner, so I'd have to take the risk of hanging out in my Jeep for a few minutes.

I pulled out my phone, glad that I was in the middle of town where you can almost always pick up a signal. First, I sent a quick text to Wren and Ed.

May have a slight trespassing problem.

Know a good lawyer??? Only half kidding.

Their replies came quickly, within a minute, and only

seconds apart. They both wanted to know where I was, and when I told them, they said they were on their way. Ed had to have been wondering how I'd gotten into trouble barely an hour after he'd dropped me off. Wren, on the other hand, was mostly going to be annoyed that I hadn't included her on my moonlight caper.

But they were both coming, no questions asked. It was good to have friends. And they would probably be rewarded with ringside seats to watch me being carted off to the county jail. At least I'd be spared the whole one-phone-call routine.

If I was going down, though, I was taking Webb with me. He was hiding something. Something connected to that noxious smell that clung to his shed and his truck. There was

also that odd assortment of trash. The house hadn't appeared freshly painted, so unless Webb was cranking out dozens of murals inside that shed, what was he doing with all that paint thinner?

I turned the heater down and brought up the browser on my phone. "What are you hiding, Gary Webb?" I asked the phone, like a psychic consulting her crystal ball. But since I really didn't expect an answer to that question, I also typed in a few words—*paint thinner cat urine excess trash*. The fifth link down on the results page was an article entitled, aptly enough, "Is My Neighbor Cooking Meth?"

Bingo.

There was a small part of me that had suspected as much back at Webb's place. I didn't know much about

methamphetamine. In fact, everything I'd learned was from nightly newscasts, the few articles I'd edited on the topic while working at the *Nashville News-Journal*, and the handful of *Breaking Bad* episodes I'd watched with Cassie. I hadn't quite been able to pin down the reason the smell made me suspicious, but something about the whole setup had set off warning bells.

I had to call Blevins. He might not be willing to investigate the dead bear on my property, but a potential meth lab was serious business. Plus, the guy was a notorious publicity hound. He'd definitely be willing to check if he thought it might land him credit for a major drug bust.

So I dialed 911 and quickly relayed what I'd seen to the woman who answered. Twice she asked my name, and twice

I ignored her. They'd have my cell number, I was sure, and it wouldn't be hard for Blevins to put two and two together.

And yes, there would be questions about what I'd been doing on Webb's property, but I was ready. *Why, Blevins, I would say in my most sincere voice, I was worried about poor Gary's health. He was complaining about chest pains earlier in the day, when last I saw him. Just imagine my surprise when I spotted that meth lab!*

I knew it was bogus, Gary would know it was bogus, and Blevins would probably know it, too. But I hardly thought that would matter given what I was sure Blevins would find inside that shed.

Of course, I'd been sure about Ben Faircloth too, hadn't I? I disconnected the call before the operator could ask more

questions. Then, I sat in the Wrangler for a moment and stared out at the bright lights of Pat's Diner without actually seeing them.

What if I was wrong?

But I couldn't think about that. In the words of Agatha Christie, the cat was now among the pigeons.

I got out of the Jeep and hurried across the parking lot. Stepping through the door, I spotted Patsy behind the counter.

"You just cain't stay away, can you, girl? I've got two cherry pies that came out of the oven not five minutes ago. Should be ready to cut soon."

"Sounds great," I said and tried my best to return her smile. But my mind was elsewhere. Had Webb seen the

security images yet? Was Blevins headed out there already to check out my tip?

“Wren and Ed are on their way,” I told Patsy and then I headed toward our booth.

“Sure thing,” Patsy said.

I turned sideways in the booth so that I could keep an eye on the door. The entire front of the diner was a wide bank of windows, separated by just a few strips of chrome and the front door. It was mostly dark on Main Street, except for the glow from the lampposts, and so bright inside the diner that all I could see in the glass was reflections. I felt exposed and vulnerable. No, I didn't think Gary Webb would shoot me through the window. But if he decided to make an appearance, I wanted to see him before he saw me.

Patsy filled my coffee cup with decaf without asking. At one time, I'd considered decaf an abomination, but sleep seems to avoid me these days if I drink coffee after six. And right now, I was jumpy enough without the extra caffeine. "I'll let you know when that pie is cool enough to eat," she said, and headed back to the kitchen.

Wren and Ed came through the front door a few minutes later. I'm not sure how they managed to show up at the same instant when Wren lives a lot closer, but I didn't care. I was just glad to see them. They headed for the booth, scooting into the bench across from me.

"It was Gary," I told them before they even had a chance to ask. "Gary Webb. He's the one who trapped the bear."

Wren lifted an eyebrow. "How do you know that? This

wouldn't have anything to do with the slight trespassing problem you mentioned, now would it?"

"That's a very astute observation, Wren. I stopped by Webb's place on the way home, after Ed dropped me off. I thought I'd caught a glimpse of razor wire on the fence around Gary's shed. The kind you see on prison walls...and also the kind I removed from Remy's leg."

"So Webb caught you on his property?" Ed asked.

"Not in person. But I'm pretty sure his security camera got some excellent shots of my startled face."

"Ooh, not good," Wren said.

"There's more." I told them about the paint thinner jugs, the litter box smell, and the trash bags. I opened my mouth to tell them about my internet search, although I had the

feeling Ed knew exactly where I was going, judging from his expression. But before I could form the words, the bell above the front door jingled and I looked up to see Gary Webb heading straight toward us.

He did not look happy. In fact, the veins were bulging out along the side of his neck.

“Why were you sneaking around my house?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “My cameras caught you on my back porch. They also picked up your Jeep heading towards town. Not hard to find someone in Thistlewood, Ruth.”

I felt Ed’s boot nudge my leg beneath the table. I glanced over at him, but his eyes didn’t meet mine. They were instead focused on Gary’s right pocket. He was carrying a pistol. Of course.

Honesty might be the best policy, I decided—at least up to a point. “I thought maybe you had something to do with that bear trap in my woods,” I said, locking eyes with him. “So I decided to have a look for myself.”

“A look for yourself?” Gary smirked and glanced around, as if to ask the rest of the patrons if they could believe my nerve. “On private property?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Patsy had taken notice of Gary’s demeanor. She was standing at the edge of the counter, watching the scene play out. A baseball bat was stashed under that counter. It had been there since my friend Tanya worked at the diner when we were in high school. Patsy’s hands were hidden by the counter right now, but I was willing to bet they were wrapped around the handle of

that Louisville Slugger.

The *entire* diner was watching us. Surely, Webb wouldn't try anything crazy with at least a dozen witnesses?

"That's not a very neighborly attitude," I said. "Especially when we both know that you've been sneaking around in my woods. All I did was take a quick peek inside your living room window."

"*That's against the law!*" Webb screamed at the top of his lungs as his face turned a rather impressive shade of crimson.

"Against the law? Really?" As soon as the words left my mouth, I could have kicked myself. The sarcasm in my voice had been unmistakable and that's probably why Gary's expression shifted. If he'd had any doubts before, he was now quite certain that this was about more than just a dead

bear.

His hand reached for his pocket. Ed twitched slightly across the table. He was getting ready to pounce, although I wasn't sure how that would go, given that his hip made even sliding out of the booth a struggle.

Then, the front door crashed open. Patsy screamed, raising the bat to swing.

“HANDS IN THE AIR! Webb, that means you.”

Blevins. Bless him... Those were three words I'd never expected to string together in my mind, but his timing couldn't have been better.

Gary turned to face the door. The color slowly drained from his face.

“In the air,” Blevins said again. “Don't wait for me to say

it again, Gary. Because you know darn well I won't. I will drop you right here in the middle of diner."

Okay, so that last part sounded just a *bit* dramatic, but I was willing to let it pass. The sheriff's service pistol was raised and ready, its barrel pointed straight at Gary's chest.

Gary did as he was told, raising his hands slowly in the air and taking a single step away from our table. Patsy suddenly seemed to realize that she was holding the bat, and quickly lowered it to her side.

"Well," Ed muttered under his breath. "That was... unexpected."

Not to mention awkward. The three of us sat at the table without saying a word as Blevins slapped handcuffs on Webb and gave him his Miranda warning. I'm sure Blevins

noticed us, just as I'm sure he knew I was the one who'd made the call. He didn't say anything, however. It was as if we weren't even there.

Webb's lip trembled as the sheriff led him through the now-silent diner and out the door. Given how many lives he was probably wrecking with his backyard chemistry project, I couldn't much sympathy for the man. And any tiny shred that might have existed was erased by thought of that bear trap and the cub currently recovering inside my shed.

The place remained silent for a moment, and then Ed suddenly burst out laughing.

Wren looked at me and then back at Ed with a baffled expression on her face. "What on earth is so funny?" she asked. "We almost got shot!"

Ed wiped his streaming eyes. "Blevins," he finally choked out. "And Ruth. I can't believe she did it."

"Is he okay?" Wren asked.

Ed reached into his back pocket and slapped his wallet on the table. "You did it, Ruth. Somehow, you did it."

I was lost. "I did what?"

"You somehow got Blevins to arrest the guy who killed that bear."

Ed opened his wallet and took out a twenty. Then, I remembered his promise when he'd dropped me off at my Jeep earlier.

"I'm not sure I can hold you to that," I told him. "You were right. Blevins would have laughed in my face if I'd gone to him with those pictures of Webb's hunting trophies."

And he'd probably have arrested me for trespassing to boot."

"Nope. A deal is a deal. Hey, Patsy?"

She looked up from the counter, where she'd just replaced her peacekeeping bat. "What can I get ya, Ed?"

"When you have a second, could you bring us three slices of that pie you've got cooling in the window?" He reached across the table and gave my hand a quick squeeze. "And be sure to make them à la mode."



NEXT UP: A MURDER IN HELVETICA BOLD (Thistlewood Star #1)

JOURNALIST RUTH TOWNSEND and her best friend, Wren Lawson, think they've finally learned the truth about the disappearance of their high school friend, Tanya Blackburn. Things aren't always as they appear on the surface, though. A set of paintings left for Ruth at the estate sale of a former teacher seem to contain clues about what really happened to Tanya in the summer of 1987. But when Ruth unboxes the collection, she discovers that Wren may be keeping a few secrets of her own.



A note from Ruth: I never miss a good story, and neither should you. Sign up now to be in the know about all the great stuff Jessa offers subscribers—giveaways, excerpts, and new release notifications. See you on the list!

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Coastal Playhouse

Excerpt: A Murder in Helvetica Bold (Thistlewood Star
Mysteries #1)

EDITH'S BODY was the first thing I saw when I stepped into the foyer, where she was crumpled like a pile of forgotten laundry at the bottom of the staircase. As I drew nearer, it became clear that her neck was twisted at an odd angle. I wasn't squeamish about crime scenes and dead bodies, having seen plenty of them while working at the *News-*

Journal. Something about the woman's expression chilled me, though. Her eyes were wide, staring straight at me, her mouth partially open as if gasping in surprise.

I looked past the body to the long wooden staircase, which had a carpeted runner going up the middle. Something was on the landing, and even though I knew I really shouldn't, I stepped over the body and went up to investigate. The steps creaked beneath my shoes, doing everything in their power to alert the authorities to the fact that I was intruding on a crime scene. Or rather, a *possible* crime scene. The most plausible explanation was that Edith, who was in her eighties, had simply stumbled and fallen to her death. But something about the look of utter surprise on her face made it hard to accept that explanation.

I thought there was a very good chance that she'd been pushed. For that matter, the killer might still be in the house.

The last notion sent a surge of adrenaline through my veins, even though it seemed unlikely. Based on my previous experience, Edith had been dead for several hours, if not longer. Plus, Elaine Huckabee's shriek would have chased away even the most dedicated of serial killers.

When I reached the landing, I knelt down to inspect the shattered coffee cup at the edge of the stair runner. There were traces of a light-brown liquid among the shards of china. Not dark enough to be coffee. It might be tea, but if so, I believe Edith had added a little something to her cuppa—whiskey, judging from the scent.

I startled at the sound of approaching sirens. They were

very unnecessary at this point, since Edith was beyond help, but Wren wouldn't have known that when she called 911. Hurrying back down the stairs, I stepped over Edith's body and let myself out the front door.

A police car screeched to a halt, half in Edith's driveway and half in her front yard. It wasn't just any cruiser. The word *Sheriff* was stenciled across the side in blocky green letters. I rolled my eyes, wishing it had been the deputy. Steve Blevins is a jerk.

This assessment is based partly on my own high school experiences with him, back when he had a luxurious head of feathered blond hair, drove a cherry-red Camaro, and thought he was God's most gracious gift to the girls at Thistlewood High. His rock-star tresses were long gone, and

you never saw the man without a hat these days—either the cowboy style he wears on duty or a baseball cap if he's not in uniform. This led me to suspect that his hair had given up trying to survive on a skull that thick. I'd bumped into Blevins a few times since returning to Thistlewood. The man's personality hadn't improved with age, and there was definitely no love lost between him and Ed. The fact that Steve's son, Derrick, was the one who smacked into Ed like he was a roadside pinata had only complicated an animosity between the two men that spanned several decades.

So, I avoided Blevins whenever possible. But like it or not, I was going to have to deal with him now. I decided not to mention my trip upstairs. If the information came to light, so be it, but I certainly wasn't going to volunteer anything.

“Ms. Townsend.” Steve nodded to me solemnly as he approached Edith’s door. I was pretty sure I detected a note of sarcasm, but it’s rare for him to say anything without a verbal sneer.

“Sheriff,” I responded casually, as if there wasn’t a dead body lying only a few feet behind me.

“You were inside?”

He saw me coming out, so unless the door was a portal to an alternate dimension, he knew full well that I had been inside.

“Yes.” I nodded toward Elaine, who was clinging to Wren like a piece of fruit that refused to give up the vine. “You’ll need to talk to her. She found the body.”

Sheriff Blevins gave Elaine the briefest of glances.

“Thanks,” he said wryly, “but I reckon I still know how to do my job.”

That’s one of at least a dozen reasons I’ve never liked Blevins. His attitude sucks.

“I’m going in,” he announced dramatically.

“Okay. If you expect me to cover you, though, I’m afraid I’m not armed today.”

He gave me a snide, half-second smile. “Still hilarious after all these years, Townsend. Guess your ex didn’t appreciate your biting wit?”

Blevins disappeared inside, clearly pleased with himself for striking a low blow. Fifteen seconds later, he was back.

“She’s dead.”

“Really?” I stopped myself from rolling my eyes and

calling him Captain Obvious.

“Did you take pictures?” he asked as his gray eyes scanned my hands, pockets, and finally came to rest on my head. It was at that moment that I realized I still had the brown newsboy cap on. Great.

“Of course not,” I said. “That would be ghoulish. Edith deserves her privacy.”

Blevins didn’t seem too concerned about that, however—he’d left the door wide open, and Edith’s body was clearly visible. I didn’t like seeing her that way. True, I’d barely known her, but still...she was a person with a right to basic dignity. Still, I found myself wishing I’d brought my phone so that I could have gotten a shot of the shattered cup at the top of the landing.

About the Author

Jessa Archer writes sweet, funny, warm-hearted cozy mysteries because she loves a good puzzle and can't stand the sight of blood. Her characters are witty, adventurous, and crafty in the nicest way. You'll find her sleuths hand lettering inspirational quotes, trying to lower golf handicaps, enjoying a scone at a favorite teashop, knitting a sweater, or showing off a dramatic side in local theater.

Jessa's done many things in her long career, including a stint as a journalist and practicing law. But her favorite job is spinning mysteries. She loves playing small town sleuth and transporting readers to a world where the scones are delicious, wine pairs with hand lettering, and justice always prevails.

If you want to know when Jessa's next book will be available, visit her website, www.jessaarcher.com where you can sign up for her newsletter.

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